

EXCERPT FROM *LETTERS FROM HOME* by Kristina McMorris

*December 18, 1944*

*Belgium*

After ten long hours, the convoy came to a halt, this time with orders to proceed on foot. In a single column of human dominoes, they marched thirty feet apart as a defense strategy.

Morgan stared at the muddy trail ahead. Lining the road, GI helmets topped bayoneted rifles planted in the ground; each acted as a “litter” marker for the frozen soldiers lying in the ditches awaiting proper burial. Horse and cow carcasses lay half buried in the snow, adding to the smell of decay and despair. In the opposing direction, a drove of refugees and civilians marched endlessly to nowhere. The feeble travelers, forced to abandon their homes, hauled only their lightest and most valuable belongings.

Morgan hardly batted an eye at the gruesome scene that would have sickened him before entering the war. Death and devastation had since become the norm. He was, however, surprisingly troubled by another sight: a little girl crying over a doll she had dropped in the dirty slush. Strangers carelessly trampled what must have been her last cherished possession, her pleas ignored like those of countless innocents wracked in the enemy crossfire. He watched the child being tugged away. Her desperate wails compressed his heart.

He wanted to chase after her and wipe her tears, tell her it would all be over soon. But he couldn't; word had it Hitler wasn't about to relinquish his throne. Even now, in a massive counterattack, the Führer's armies were penetrating thinly defended areas through the Ardennes forest, entrapping GIs and pushing battle lines back toward the English Channel. With Allied troops stretched too far away from supplies, the tide of the war could clearly turn in Germany's favor.

Morgan tried not to dwell on that possibility once he'd reached Slevant. But it was easier said than done. In spite of the U.S. Army's need-to-know restrictions, something told him their impending confrontation would be their most crucial yet. And rumors of a massacre of American POWs in Malmédy only magnified his nerves.

“Spread out and dig in!” shouted the second lieutenant, fresh from West Point.

"We expecting backup?" Frank asked.

"That's a negative. Orders are to hold the line, whatever it takes. Shoot anything that moves." With that, the guy jumped into a jeep and careened away—far away, Morgan hoped. In battle, rookie officers often proved the greatest liability.

As engineers rushed to lay mines, Morgan scouted the darkening town for tactical stationing points. Going with his gut, he led Charlie to the top of a hill overlooking a steep-sided valley and a large portion of the village. The location sandwiched them between two heavily armed teams. To the right, an embankment sported a pair of antitank bazooka GIs separated from their company; to the left, Frank and a band of machine gunners held the roof of a two-story brewery.

The ground too frozen for them to excavate, Morgan and Charlie forged a foxhole by scooping snow with their helmets. No sooner had they finished packing their mound than a message reached the hill: A Kraut armored column was headed north, directly toward Slevant.

The countdown had begun.

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*December 19, 1944*

*Slevant, Belgium*

As darkness slid into dawn, Morgan battled his shivers with warm thoughts: hot coffee by a campfire, the tool shed in July, Betty's letters. Yet nothing could stop the chill from invading his bones.

Scrunched in the snow, blanketed knees beneath his chin, he strained to hear the first hint of a rumbling tank. But all he detected was his brother smacking chewing gum beside him. Its wintergreen scent only added to the cold. The kid soon spat out the wad, surely too hard to chew.

"*They're comin'.*" Anxious whispers rushed from one embankment to the next. A bucket brigade passing fuel to feed an explosion.

Following Charlie's lead, Morgan kicked off his blanket. He yanked the bulky gloves off his numb hands and grasped his rifle as tightly as he could. His pulse was

gaining speed. He crouched farther into their icy hole to keep his helmet and misty breaths out of possible enemy view. Shoulder to shoulder, they awaited the signal to attack.

An uneasy stillness. Then a muffled rattling. Tanks grinding over the snow, drawing closer and closer with every turn of their bogies.

Morgan turned to his brother, whose eyes were rimmed in red. "Ready?" he asked in a cautious undertone.

"You bet." Though Charlie spoke in a whisper, there was strength in his voice. Even his jaw appeared boldly set, projecting maturity, a steadiness free of fear.

Morgan felt a pinch in his chest, rooted deep inside. The sensation, he quickly recognized, was something resembling . . . loss.

The growing rattling refocused his thoughts. He edged his head up. Through the fog, he counted three Panther tanks entering the village. The Allied troops held tight, waiting for the juggernauts to reach the center of the battle stage.

Suddenly, a Kraut officer yelled an order and the armored vehicles halted.

Morgan hunkered down in the hole. *C'mon, c'mon*, he urged in his mind. But there was no movement. No sound but the faint howling of wind.

Maybe they'd changed their minds. Could be they knew the GIs were there, and were deciding on an easier route across the Amblève River. Imagine. Morgan's squad left fully intact, saved to battle another day, even allowed an entire day of rest.

No sooner had the rosy thoughts formed than the tanks resumed an onward charge.

*Boom! Boom!*

The first antitank rockets were fired from the remnants of a theater on the other side of the village. The curtain had been raised and the show was under way.

Morgan joined Charlie in stretching his neck to take another look over the embankment. More armored vehicles rolled into town, angling around their casualties.

One of the bazookamen signaled a warning to Morgan, then brought binoculars back to his face. Morgan tried not to blink despite the breeze stinging his bleary eyes. Aware of the white ski suits Krauts often wore as camouflage, he flexed his trigger finger, gearing up to pick off anything in motion larger than a snowflake.

Another signal, and he and Charlie teetered their rifles on the edge of the packed

mound, the butt ends shoved into their shoulders. They trained their barrels on the Waffen-SS Panzer troops weaving through the village. On Morgan's mark, the two plucked their triggers, a percussion of fire in the violent chorus. The blasting of shells from American howitzers and Kraut tanks added to the cacophony of battle. And up above, an Artist brushed the sky with majestic red and white flashes.

*Clink!*

In one swift motion, Morgan pulled a new eight-round clip from his ammo belt and shoved it into the receiver of his rifle, then continued where he left off.

*Swoosh!*

A German Messerschmitt 109 plane swooped down through clouds. It released a bomb that obliterated a steepled church. Weather had grounded Allied planes, but somehow the damn Luftwaffe pilots always made it into the air.

*Ack-ack-ack-ack!*

An antiaircraft battery sent a second Messerschmitt twirling to its smoke-trailed fate. Despite its proximity, Morgan barely felt the ground reverberate when the plane slammed into the earth; his focus had turned to the detonation of American bombs on the village's strategically coveted bridge. Now, with the arched structure destroyed, he hoped the Germans would call for a retreat.

At the base of the hill, amidst the fog and billowing smoke, something moved. Morgan took aim at the figure. About to shoot, he glimpsed the soldier's face. It was Geronimo!

The Texan, layered with a hefty supply of ammunition bandoliers, sprang out from an emplacement and raced toward the brewery. He sped through a hailstorm of bullets, head held high, as though granted mystical armor by his Apache ancestors. Morgan watched wide-eyed, almost believing the GI's invincibility, before a Kraut's rifle cut him down a few yards from the doorway.

Morgan scanned the area. Medics must have already had their hands full. There was no one running to help Geronimo, no hero to complete his mission.

Then Charlie started to rise.

"Where *you* goin'?" Morgan shouted, grabbing hold of his brother's jacket.

Charlie tried to wrench away. "Somebody's gotta help."

He was right, but it wasn't going to be Charlie. No matter how much the kid wanted

redemption for Mouse.

“Stay here,” Morgan told him, “I’ll go.”

“I got it!” he protested, but Morgan yanked him down.

“I said: *Stay. Here.*” Morgan didn’t release his grip until Charlie gave half a nod.

Preparing to reload, Morgan fired his rifle incessantly and emptied his clip. He expelled his fear in a deep puff. As he hugged the loaded weapon to his chest, the heated barrel stung his palm.

*Three . . . two . . . one.*

“Cover me!” he said to Charlie, and climbed out.

A series of shots popped like a John Deere behind Morgan, confirming his brother had taken his order. Thanks to years of racing Charlie home from school through winter drifts, he made his way to the bottom as easily as if the knee-deep snow were only ankle high. His legs were slower than they used to be, but the chatter of machine guns and belching blasts of German “burp guns” were damn good motivators.

He dropped behind an empty embankment and carved out his three objectives. The first was reaching Geronimo.

Through the sulfuric air and trodden slush, he ran hunched over toward the fallen GI. A swarm of bullets whizzed this way and that. Adrenaline enabled Morgan to flip Geronimo face-up with little effort. Two fingers pressed to the Southerner’s neck and he knew. A form telegram would soon announce the loss of another good man.

Morgan felt a stab of grief, but paying his respects would have to wait. Instead, like a vulture, he stripped the ammo off the soldier’s body. With the town’s Allied blockades and maze of tanks, Kraut infantry were about to be streamlined directly past the brewery. There, the rooftop gunners needed all the firepower they could get to maintain control of the village, a stronghold that could bring them one victory closer to home.

Supplies bundled in his arms, Morgan sprinted into the brewery. He hopped and maneuvered his way up the debris-covered stairwell. On the roof, he found the GIs plugging away with bipod machine guns.

“I’m out!” one yelled in a panic, his stash depleted.

Morgan handed the ammo over to a grateful sergeant, then wheeled and headed back down.

On the homestretch.

As he emerged from the building, a Panther tank across the road exploded. He grabbed his helmet, hit the ground. Rubble peppered his face. The smell of gasoline was so pungent he could taste it, the fire so hot he nearly forgot it was winter.

He spat cobblestone particles out of his mouth. A screech that sounded like a banshee's lifted his head. Flames engulfed the vehicle's mounted cannon. A Kraut trooper dangled from the turret hatch. An Allied shell had found its mark.

Ears ringing, Morgan jumped to his feet and blasted his rifle aimlessly while weaving his way to the hill. He cowered down as he stomped up the slope. The nauseating stink of burning flesh was enough to maintain his speed, a tougher trek going up. Halfway to the top, he saw Charlie scurrying to their ditch.

What the hell was he doing? *Get back in the hole! Get back in the hole!*

Morgan intensified his dash. The kid was exposing his position like a new recruit at basic. Or worse, a daredevil with something to prove. After the battle, Charlie was going to get an earful.

*Tat-tat-tat! Tat-tat-tat!* Staccato fire flared up above. Morgan flattened on the ground. His cheek stung against the frigid floor. At a break in the firing, he resumed his plod upward.

The crest of the hill only a few yards away, he raised his head, and froze at the sight. They were darker than black, colder than night: the penetrating eyes of a stone-faced Kraut. In the enemy's hand, a submachine gun glinted its barrel. A barrel pointed straight at Morgan.

Instinct took charge, pitching Morgan backward. As he tumbled down the hill, he felt a stabbing in his left leg, like prongs of a red-hot pitchfork. His velocity slowed until he landed on his side at the bottom, dazed, empty-handed. He squeezed several blinks to clear his vision.

His M1! Where was his M1? The butt of his rifle peeked out from the snow—yet it lay no closer than a tank's length away. Fear boiled in his chest. He prepared to leap for his weapon, just as the memory of an Irishman's voice returned.

*Body flat. Eyes down. Don't move.*

Breath held, he remained still as a corpse.

*Crunch . . . crunch . . .*

The faint sound of the enemy's boots intensified. The bear drew nearer.

Morgan prayed the trooper's desire to salvage ammo would prevent him from spattering more bullets at his motionless form. Not betting on it, he inched his right hand toward the Luger in his belt, half pinned under his hip.

*Crunch . . . crunch . . .*

Then the sound stopped. The Kraut was reloading his gun.

*Go! Go! Go!*

In a continuous move, Morgan arched, swung the pistol forward, and fired in succession. The trooper jerked from the impact and slammed onto his back. Blood oozing over the snow confirmed the match was over.

Within seconds, a thought clawed Morgan's mind: The trooper had gotten past the GIs up above. Which meant . . .

*Charlie.*

Morgan fumbled to stand. The throbbing in his leg told him a pair of bullets had pierced his flesh. Pushing down a groan, he once more clambered up the slanted path.

"Charlie!" he screamed against the blasts. "Charlie! Where are you?"

Atop the hill's plateau, he spotted the back of his brother's body, draped over the side of their ditch thirty feet away. The air went numb. The battle ceased. No tanks, no artillery, no pain from his wounds. Nothing but Charlie's inert form, and sheer terror propelling Morgan forward.